Fall 12-12-2016

Living Subversive Narratives: Shahrazad's Stories of Women

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December 12, 2016

Introduction

"I should like to inform the honorable gentlemen and noble readers that the purpose of writing this agreeable and entertaining book is the instruction of those who peruse it, for it abounds with highly edifying histories and excellent lessons…" The Arabian Nights *(3)*

Just as the introductory letter to the *Arabian Nights* asserts, the text is full of "edifying histories and excellent lessons." While these histories may not always be true in a factual sense, they serve to crystallize moments from the eras and the cultures in which the *Nights* were composed. Like the oral histories that made up parts of the Bible, or the Epic of Gilgamesh, the *Nights* communicates the soul of a culture without being fixated on telling factual narratives. The tale of Shahrazad telling stories to save her own life is one that flows from many traditions. The stories she tells to save her life come from an even wider variety of cultural and historical sources. As a result, Shahrazad's story, and the stories she tells, come to represent a plethora of cultural and historical moments. Despite her origins, Shahrazad is a character who emerges as strikingly relatable, even in a modern context. When the story of Shahrazad was originally told, the audience became immersed in the story because they were able to imagine a king so violently controlling that the only way to survive around him was to barter for one's life each day. For modern listeners and readers, this scenario may not be as familiar. What is familiar, however, are stories about marginalized people who attempt to construct narratives that increase their chances of survival.

Because of her relatability to modern marginalized people, Shahrazad's method of resisting the power that is exerted against her is worth examining closely. A shallow reading will yield results that would leave a 21st century feminist disappointed with Shahrazad. While Shahrazad sets out to save the women of the kingdom from death at the hands of Shahrayar, she

ends up telling stories that seem to support a patriarchal view of the world. If readers are willing to read more closely, however, and understand the cultural context, they will be able to see ways that Shahrazad does resist patriarchal power.

This close reading begins with an exploration of the function of Shahrazad's tales. The main body of the *Nights* is a collection of stories that Shahrazad tells in an attempt to save her life day by day. But what else do these stories accomplish? The stories are the mediation between Shahrazad, who is oppressed, and Shahrayar who is in power. Does this mediation serve to do anything other than to save Shahrazad's life each day? If it does serve a function outside of saving Shahrazad's life, what is that function? In understanding what Shahrazad's stories do, a reader is able to better understand her model of resisting the power exerted against her.

To explore Shahrazad's model of resistance, I have chosen four tales from the *Nights*: the frame story or the story of Shahrazad herself, "The First Old Man's Tale," "The Tale of the Enchanted King," and "The Story of `Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." In order to understand the context of the stories she tells, one must have an understanding of Shahrazad's own story and the situation in which she finds herself. Each of the additional stories feature prominent female characters. These characters show the range of the females depicted in the *Nights*: some are heroes and some are villains. Because each story features one or more female characters, they are excellent texts in which to examine Shahrazad's representation of women. A close reading of these stories reveals that Shahrazad tends to depict her female heroes as lacking any apparent autonomy and her villains as having an abundance of it. To a 21st century reader, these images are extremely limited and undoubtedly problematic. In order to appreciate the stories' subversive potential, a reader must understand their function within the context of the frame story.

In order to understand their function, a reader must examine several aspects of the stories. First, one must determine the degree of unity or disunity among the stories. It is often argued that the *Nights* is a collection of different tales that have little to no sense of unity. If this were true, it would not be fruitful to attempt to explain their function. A close reading of these stories, however, reveals that they are unified and share enough with one another to warrant a discussion of the issue of function. Secondly, one must explore the portraits Shahrazad paints of women. Though these portraits are not feminist in the 21st century sense of the term, reading them closely along with the frame reveals that they do push against Shahrayar's understanding of women. Finally, one must consider the power that is exerted against Shahrazad in the context of the frame narrative. If a reader is to be able to understand the function of Shahrazad's tales, they must understand what forces threaten her and thus motivate her to censor the stories she tells. Examining these elements will lead a reader to see that while Shahrazad's portraits of women are limited, she does manage to use both her stories and her life to subvert Shahrayar's expectations of women. By subverting Shahrayar's expectations of women, Shahrazad manages to subvert the greater culture's limited, patriarchal understanding of women.

Part I: Unified and Impactful Tales

Many objections may be raised when one undertakes the task of analyzing the function of the stories Shahrazad tells. Some scholars argue that the complicated history of the *Nights*--the fact that it issues from many different cultures and eras—means that Shahrazad's tales lack unity and thus lack any function. Others argue there is no function to any of the stories told within the frame narrative because they have no impact on the frame narrative. Before any questions can be asked about the function of Shahrazad's tales, a reader needs to examine these objections and introduce a new framework through which to view the *Nights*.

The complicated history of the authorship of the *Nights* is enough to give a reader pause when trying to examine even the simplest of questions. As Robert Irwin describes in *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*

> Most scholars agreed that the *Nights* was a composite work and that the earliest tales in it came from India and Persia. At some time, probably in the early eighth century, these tales were translated into Arabic under the title of *Alf Layla*, or 'The Thousand Nights.' This collection then formed the basis of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The original core of stories was quite small. Then, in Iraq in the ninth or tenth century, this original core had Arab stories added to it -- among them some of the tales about the Caliph Haran al-Rashid. (48)

This history of the *Nights*'s travel through several cultures is only the beginning of the tale about how it ends up in the hands of Western readers. The story gets even more complicated when one adds in arguments over the accuracy of various manuscripts. This complication grows with a long and painful process of piecing together older manuscripts from newer ones, and a variety of translation techniques. Irwin recounts the tale of how Muhsin Madhi spent 15 years of labor attempting to produce a satisfying manuscript from the pieces of others he was able to collect (54-55). All of these difficulties in compiling and translating the *Nights* highlight some of the complications in understanding it.

These complications related to the history of the *Nights* have compelled many people to ignore questions about the function of Shahrazad's stories within it. Many scholars claim that the *Nights*'s varied cultural history and its journey through various authors left it without a sense of unity. In "*A Thousand and One Nights* -- An Anarchetypal Epos," for example, Corin Braga examines two different models of collections of narratives: the archetypal model and the

anarchetypal model. The archetypal model has a unifying theme and purpose, where the anarchetypal model is "diffuse and centerless" (281). As part of this argument, which focuses on the *Nights* as an anarchetypal model, Braga argues that "[t]o such an invertebrate [the *Nights*] may be appended countless new episodes and sequences without their upsetting any sense of coherence and finitude" (282). Thus, Braga's argument supposes that the stories of the *Nights* have no sense of commonality at all. He asserts that any tale with any theme and any kind of characters could be added and would fit just as well as the tales that are already included.

While Braga's model of an anarchetypal collection of stories is certainly a useful model for interpreting certain story collections (one might argue the Bible is one such example), it is not a complete or compelling way of reading the *Nights*. It misses the opportunities to see the thematic unity that is present in the *Nights*. My own analysis of just a few stories will demonstrate a strong sense of commonality, even among stories that originated from different eras and cultural contributions to the *Nights*. This unity in the tales is widely perceived, despite the complicated history of the *Nights*. Ibrahim Muhawi notes the way that the stories are unified in his piece "The 'Arabian Nights' and the Question of Authorship." Using Michel Foucault's writings as a frame to interpret the *Nights*, Muhawi argues that "the narrative interplay takes place in the process of embedding stories that reflect the main theme of the frame story--saving life by telling an amazing story" (336). The repeated emergence of the theme of saving a life is no accident; it relates directly to the frame narrative in which the stories are being told. This thematic unity demonstrates that the stories do indeed have a collective function. They are undoubtedly aiming to change Shahrayar's mind. While Muhawi sees the theme of saving a life as the story's central unity, the stories are also thematically unified on the topic of women. From the stories I have selected, two basic types of women emerge. Those who are autonomous,

traditionally cast as villains, and those who demonstrate no autonomy, traditionally cast as heroes or aids to heroes. The common and limited ways they are depicted allow a reader to ask questions about how Shahrazad's stories function to change the way Shahrayar understands women.

Even those scholars who see the *Nights* as a unified work often still dismiss questions about the function of Shahrazad's stories based on the complications that surround the authorship of the *Nights*. Madhi, who compiled one of the more popular manuscripts of the *Nights*, dismisses questions about the function of Shahrazad's stories by suggesting that the stories told in the *Nights*, whether by Shahrazad or by her father, have no impact on the narrative of the frame story (Muhawi 329). He proposes that "none of the characters to whom the exemplary tales are addressed acts [sic] according to the moral the tale is supposed to teach" (329). Perhaps at first this seems like a fair conclusion, considering Shahrazad all but ignores the point of her father's story, which attempts to convince her that she should heed his words (*The Arabian Nights* 17). Additionally, Shahrayar does not decide permanently to spare Shahrazad's life after a single one of her stories. Rather, he only makes the decision not to kill her one day at a time. This may also seem to indicate that Shahrazad's stories are not serving a greater function than daily distraction. However, at the end of 1001 nights, Shahrayar makes the decision to spare Shahrazad's life. Since it seems Shahrazad has no purpose more pressing than to save her own life, and that she eventually succeeds in this endeavor, it is apparent that some of the stories have an impact on the frame narrative. If they did not impact the frame, the tales would end with Shahrazad suffering execution at the hand of Shahrayar.

If Shahrazad's stories have this ultimate impact on Shahrayar, how do Shahrazad's stories manage to accomplish this? Muhawi discusses the relationship between the narrative of

the frame and the narratives that Shahrazad tells through the lens of Foucault's concepts of interiority and exteriority saying

> The relation of the frame story to embedded tale is one of interiority to exteriority. The interiority of the frame story of Shahrazad and Shahrayar quickly unfolds into the exteriority of the embedded stories… The moment that a narrative is equated with a life, as it is in many stories in the first two hundred and eighty nights, is the moment when the interior of the narrative unfolds into its exterior. (335-336)

By highlighting the subject of many of the first stories, how life is saved through narrative, Muhawi is drawing attention to the way that the frame narrative is connected to the stories being told within the frame. The stories are not a haphazard collection to which anything can be added, as Braga argues, nor are they without purpose or effect as Madhi argues. Rather, Shahrazad's life and situation come through in each story that she tells. The interior of the frame story, as Muhawi puts it, flows into the exterior of the stories being told. Muhawi describes how the stories Shahrazad tells often feature characters that barter for their lives with stories (336). Thus, the stories Shahrazad tell are unified at least in terms of the theme of saving life.

Just as this interior theme (Shahrazad saving her own life with stories) flows into the exterior theme (stories in which characters save their own lives and the lives of others with stories), so Shahrazad's interior experience as woman flows into the exterior of the stories she tells about women. The interior experience of Shahrayar being angry about adulterous women flows into the exterior, where Shahrazad tells stories about women who betray their husbands. Later, as Shahrazad attempts to get Shahrayar to believe that faithful women do exist, this interior desire manifests in the exterior of the stories where she tells tales of women who are loyal to their husbands or masters. While Shahrayar has become convinced that there are no loyal

women (he says ‘There is not a single chaste woman anywhere on the face of the earth’), Shahrazad features, in “The First Old Man’s Tale,” a sorceress so loyal to her master, she refuses to accept a reward for aid she offers him and, in “The Story of `Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” a woman who repeatedly kills for her master’s protection without any thought of reward. Shahrazad’s stories seek to protect her by convincing Shahrayar that his ideas about women are faulty.

If these stories are bound together by some commonality, despite their complicated history, and if the stories have a clear impact on the frame narrative, how should the reader understand Shahrazad’s voice as they examine the function of Shahrazad’s stories? Roland Barthes provides a framework for understanding authorship that works well for a text like the *Nights*. In his essay, “The Death of the Author,” Barthes argues that once writing has been created, it is no longer the author that connects and interprets all the pieces of that writing. Rather, the readers are left to make the connections themselves. He claims that this view of authorship leaves texts without a singular meaning that can be “deciphered.” Barthes recognizes that all writing comes from a wide variety of cultural sources. This kind of multicultural birth could not be more evident in any work than it is in the *Nights*, which was written and translated in a wide variety of cultures and time periods. Barthes explains

> a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination (5-6).

Here, a text is no longer viewed as coming from a single source. Rather, Barthes argues that any act of writing comes from a wide variety of sources.

While many critics have dismissed questions about the function of Shahrazad's tales by pointing out that her voice is formed from a cacophony of different cultures, Barthes's essay draw attention to the fact that all narratives are formed from this sort of cacophony. That does not mean that all narratives lack unity or connection. Instead, narratives find their unity in their audiences, not in their origins. The *Nights* is no exception. It is true that the stories of the *Nights* were written over several centuries, that they were written in many different areas, translated into many different languages, and at many times controlled by patriarchal cultures that did not allow women to contribute to them. Despite its complicated history, the reader experiencing it unifies all its parts into one and understands it as one work. If the reader is called to ask about Shahrazad's limited representations of women--and a close reader will be--the question is one worth examining.

With an understanding that the *Nights* is a unified text and that it is unified by the reader, a reader's questions about the *Nights* are validated. A close reading of the *Nights* coming from a feminist perspective raises questions that go straight to the heart of one of the unifying features of the *Nights*: its limited depictions of women.

Part II: The Women Shahrazad Portrays

In seeing that the tales are unified and impactful, a reader is freed to ask questions about the function of Shahrazad's tales. What exactly does Shahrazad manage to demonstrate to Shahrayar with the stories she tells? Judith Grossman asserts that she portrays women's subjectivity through her tales, and thus allows Shahrayar to see and respect women as selves. This supposes that the function of Shahrazad's tales is to assert that women are autonomous,

each with the potential for good and evil. A thorough reading of the *Nights* and an examination of some of its female characters, however, contradicts this conclusion.

When examining the stories in the *Arabian Nights*, two types of women emerge: those who are autonomous and unfaithful and those who seem to lack autonomy and are faithful. At the heart of understanding the function of Shahrazad's stories is understanding these two limited ways in which women are portrayed. Though there has not been a wealth of writing on what the function of Shahrazad's stories is, a few theories have emerged. In an article entitled "Infidelity and Fiction: The Discovery of Women's Subjectivity in "Arabian Nights,"" Grossman provides one of the clearest theories about why Shahrazad portrays women in the limited ways that she does. To Grossman, the function of Shahrazad's stories is to portray an image of women who have their own independently conscious, subjective experience. Grossman proposes that Shahrazad forms a match with "equal commitment on both sides" by taking the initiative in deciding to marry Shahrayar (121). Pursuant to this commitment, Grossman argues, "Shahrazad has offered the King massive amounts of evidence for the existence of a variety of subjective motivations in men and women alike" (125). For Grossman, Shahrazad seeks to save more than her own life with her storytelling. She is looking for an opportunity to present Shahrayar with a case for women's status as conscious selves. Grossman claims that Shahrazad paints portraits of women that have good and evil subjective motivations.

Grossman's claim becomes less convincing when Shahrazad's stories are read carefully. The text is full of examples of autonomous women, who have wills outside of the wills of their masters, but all of these autonomous women are ultimately cast as villains. The autonomous women emerge as the antagonists to male characters. These women are manipulative and often trick their husbands for purposes of adultery and personal gain. An example of this can be seen

clearly in the story titled “The First Old Man’s Tale,” which is one of the first stories that Shahrazad tells her husband. In this story, a man is fooled by his wife, who, in a jealous rage turns the man’s mistress and her son into cows, which she later tries to convince her husband to slaughter (*The Arabian Nights* 27-29). This story conveys the essential features of one of the types of women Shahrazad portrays. First, the old man’s wife is a self-made woman. She acts on her desires in her husband's absence and acts against what she knows to be his wishes. This is not an impulsive act, however. The text says that she “learned soothsaying and magic and cast a spell” (27). The wife’s attack is a long-planned, targeted assault that requires her to wait for her husband to leave and to take up training in the arts of magic. This kind of manipulative autonomy comes to be an essential character trait for many of the women in the *Arabian Nights*.

In addition to presenting autonomous women as manipulative, the story associates autonomous women with the role of the antagonist. In the tale the old man tells, his wife serves as the main obstacle to everything he wants. She cannot bear him children and when he finds a mistress who can, she is so jealous she attempts to get the mistress and the son killed off. The story finds resolution only when the wife herself is turned into a deer by another sorceress (30). These two features (autonomy and the role of the antagonist) characterize the first of the two types of women portrayed in the *Arabian Nights*.

This type of woman is not confined solely to one of Shahrazad’s stories, however. Another story she tells, “The Tale of the Enchanted King,” presents a similar kind of woman. In this case, a king who is cursed so that the bottom half of his body is stone tells the story of his wife who gave him a sleeping potion nightly so that she could go carouse with her lover. When the king discovered this, he attempted to kill her lover in secret, but succeeded only in injuring him greatly. After the king’s wife discovers that he is the one who injured her lover, she curses

her husband, turning him half to stone and curses the entire kingdom, turning all of its people into fish in a pond (69-75). Here again the audience sees a woman with fierce autonomy, who, unsatisfied with her husband, forms a clever plot to escape her husband nightly in favor of a man she desires. The wife's lover himself recognizes the power of her manipulative, autonomous nature saying "you have been playing me like a piece of marble, and I am subject to your whims" (70). Her response to her husband's actions demonstrate the degree to which she is autonomous. She is willing and able to confine an entire kingdom to continue her plans. It is almost difficult from a modern perspective not to find oneself on the side of this woman, who has likely been violently forced into her marriage and seeks escape by the only means possible. Nonetheless, the story, particularly in its context, does not invite the audience to empathize with her. The story is told by her husband and resolved with her violent death (78). She is doubtless the antagonist in this tale as well. She is the reason that everything is out of order in the kingdom and her death is the resolution to the narrative and the beginning of another age of prosperity for her husband and his kingdom (78). It is ultimately clear that through this type of woman, Shahrazad is creating an association between independence and some sort of evil. In both cases, these women are ultimately the downfall of their husbands and only their destruction can bring their husbands back to power.

That is not to say that there are no female heroes in the *Nights*, however. Grossman's assertion that the females in the stories of the *Nights* have good and evil motivations is not an incorrect one. But, the female characters who rise to the top as heroes tend to be women who have no apparent autonomy. An example of this can be found in "The First Old Man's Tale," where Shahrazad offers this portrait of a women in addition to the one it offered of the autonomous type of woman. In this story, it is another sorceress who frees the old man's son

from his plight of living as a cow. In fact, it is the daughter of the old man's shepherd who recognizes the son in cow form and eventually frees him from it. As a reward, she is offered wealth, but does not accept it (30). In this character, the audience sees a woman who is so loyal, she is willing to remain poor even when offered a reward. Instead, she asks only to be allowed to control the fate of the wife, a reward she uses to enact revenge on behalf of her master (30). Her brief appearance as a character in this story shows little other than her complete loyalty to her master. The flip side of this loyalty, however, is a lack of autonomy. She has no desire to acquire wealth and become independent from her master. Rather, she seeks only to serve him. This places her firmly in the category of women who lack any apparent autonomy and illustrates the other type of woman that Shahrazad portrays to her husband in the stories. If these characters are autonomous, the stories make no effort to mention any evidence of that fact. A reader notes that anytime a woman is portrayed as heroic, she is completely dependent upon the will of her master. Shahrazad's stories do not suppose that women are able to be heroes if they maintain a will of their own.

Once again, this story is not alone in creating this portrait of women. In a more well-known story in the *Arabian Nights*, "The Story of `Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," a slave woman, Marjana, uses her own wit repeatedly to save her master from death. Three times Marjana manages to save her master from falling victim to the plots that the forty thieves lay for him: first, by ruining a system the thieves create for identifying her master's house, secondly by killing the thirty-eight thieves who lie in wait to kill her master by suffocating them with boiling oil, and finally by unexpectedly stabbing the master of the thieves in disguise before he attempts to kill her master (*Sinbad and Other Stories from the Arabian Nights* 63-95). When telling her master of some of her exploits to save him, Marjana concludes the story saying "For my part, I

will do everything to remain vigilant for your preservation, as my duty requires" (87). Her loyalty is so great, she seems not even to pause to ask questions about whether it is worth risking her own life to save her master. Though Marjana is rewarded with freedom after suffocating the thieves, she continues to work for `Ali Baba, demonstrating the depth of her loyalty. She is completely dependent upon `Ali Baba, and in the context of the story has absolutely no purpose but to serve and protect him.

Even though Marjana is exceptionally talented (she thwarts the thieves, she is a cook, she is an accomplished dancer, etc.), she never shows the slightest tendency to do something for herself or even to do anything other than aid her master. Again, to be a female hero in one of Shahrazad's stories, a woman must not have any will or desire of her own. Her will must become the same as her masters. She is another example of a hero that seems to lack any signs of being autonomous. Ultimately, she is rewarded with marriage to the master's son, a further display of her willingness to be tied in dependence and loyalty to her master (94). Her determination to be loyal to her master is an essential feature of her character. She repeatedly asserts her willingness to protect her master and her duty to do so.

In addition to the the portrayal of Marjana's loyalty, it is worth considering what an audience may expect to find but does not. Many readers go in expecting that Marjana anticipates some sort of reward for her actions. Perhaps she is vying for her freedom or for a rise in her social status, such as the marriage to `Ali Baba's son grants her. If she does desire these things, however, Shahrazad does not find that desire worth mentioning. It appears, if we take what is in the text as the full story, that Marjana is genuinely dedicated solely to service to her master. This type of woman is faithful to the men she serves, she desires only what they want and she exists only to execute her master's will. She, unlike the other type of woman, is not the antagonist.

Rather, she serves to aid the protagonist (in this case, `Ali Baba) with whatever they wish to accomplish.

Each female hero in the sampling of stories I have examined above becomes a hero precisely by lacking the apparent subjectivity that Grossman asserts is essential to the function of Shahrazad's tales. Lisa R. Perfetti takes Grossman's conclusions a step further in her article "The *Thousand and One Nights* and Women's Comic Pleasures," claiming that by "using her stories to teach the king a more comprehensive history of womankind, Shahrazad cures him of his misogyny" (222). This comprehensive history is difficult to locate, however, when reading or hearing the stories contained within the *Nights*. The great irony is though Shahrazad is a clever, autonomous woman (she defies her father to marry Shahrayar and she defies Shahrayar's will to kill her by prolonging her life) who desires good (she wishes to save the lives of women in the kingdom), she does not present a history that features, or even includes, good and autonomous women. So while the audience knows that a "comprehensive history" would include women with good motivations who are also autonomous (as Shahrazad cannot be the only of her kind), no such women are included. This fact alone is enough to make readers seek a more substantial conclusion about the function of Shahrazad's stories.

Shahrazad's existence calls into question the pictures of women that appear in her stories. A reader may rightfully doubt that Shahrazad is representing women the way she sees them because her stories do not feature women like herself. Readers may conclude Shahrazad has no investment in changing the dominant narrative about women. Yet, an understanding of Shahrazad in the context of her situation yields a far more thorough and fruitful explanation of the limits that are placed on Shahrazad's female characters.

Part III: Shahrayar's Power and Shahrazad's Subversion

There are many forces of power at play in the frame narrative in the *Nights*, the effects of which are unnoticed by Grossman and Perfetti. A more complete reading of Shahrazad includes an understanding of her subversive potential in the context of the power that is exerted on her. Shahrazad must contend with the power of Shahrayar, who daily threatens her life. She must also contend with the fact that the history she is able to access in writing has been controlled mainly by men. These influences on her stories can be seen throughout. Shahrazad's truly amazing feat is, despite these oppressive forces, managing with her stories and with her own life to call into question the accepted views of women that dominate the frame narrative.

First, in order to understand the function of the female characters her stories depict, one must examine Shahrazad's precarious position. Each day she must save her life with an entertaining story. Shahrayar's power impacts what Shahrazad is able to do with her stories in this way. Just as the survival and popularity of the *Nights* inform the audience about what was believable in the cultures in which the *Nights* was brought into being and the cultures in which it persists, Shahrazad's tales inform the audience about what was believable and entertaining to her audience, Shahrayar. As quoted above, Barthes discusses this specific element of analyzing texts. Barthes understands the reader as the nexus where all parts of a narrative are connected. Thus, the portraits of women Shahrazad paints, those of the woman who has autonomy and is traitorous and the woman lacking autonomy who is loyal, do not inform readers of the picture Shahrazad has of women. While the questions on the table may center around Shahrazad's motivation in telling stories, it must be acknowledged that her stories may reveal far more about the nature of Shahrayar than about her own nature. The reader connects all the pieces of Shahrazad's stories, but the reader connects them knowing that Shahrayar is the intended audience. While the reader is listening to Shahrazad, they are not the audience and they are constantly aware of this. Rather,

Shahrayar is Shahrazad's audience. Thus, Shahrazad's stories will not reflect what the reader understands to be true about women, but rather what Shahrayar understands. Shahrayar is a misogynist who perpetrated the mass murder of unmarried women at the beginning of the tale. When a reader examines Shahrazad's stories, they should be compelled to connect her stories with his understanding of women, which is limited to say the least. Shahrazad, being clever, understands that the stories she builds must be stories that support enough of Shahrayar's notions of women to continue to be believable to him.

Shahrazad takes on a great risk by marrying Shahrayar. She cannot afford an act of open subversion but must be satisfied with telling stories which allow Shahrayar to become the "connection" between the "multiplicity of voices." Even Perfetti acknowledges that Shahrayar "listens...to fulfill his own desire for narrative pleasure, to find out what happens" (221). Perfetti and Grossman fail to see, however, how this drive only for pleasure censors the stories that Shahrazad is permitted to tell. Shahrazad is certainly manipulating Shahrayar with her stories, but she is doing this with the primary objective of saving her own life one cliffhanger at a time, not with the primary objective of changing Shahrayar's notions of women. Thus Shahrazad must appeal primarily to Shahrayar's pleasure and tell stories that align, for the most part, with his notions of women. That is why readers experience portraits of women that Shahrayar is likely to believe in or to want to believe in. All women who are autonomous must ultimately be evil, just as Shahrayar believes his deceased wife, who in her own display of autonomy, committed adultery against him, is ultimately evil. There is no mistaking the fact that Shahrayar does not initially trust Shahrazad, but keeps her alive because her stories are too captivating to ignore.

Shahrazad has power, but it is not a power that Shahrayar grants her, but rather one she must form day by day with her own cunning[1]. The fact that in order to survive, Shahrazad must make her stories pleasurable to Shahrayar is a notion it seems Grossman has completely ignored in her argument about the function of Shahrazad's stories in relation to Shahrayar. Her own psychoanalytic view of the text fails to account for the relationship that Shahrazad is in with Shahrayar. This relationship is the context of the story. It is not an equal partnership, as Grossman proposes, but rather one where one partner, Shahrazad, is day by day at the mercy of her own ability to summon and convincingly tell a story that will be so enthralling, it will force the other partner, Shahrayar, to defer his power over her for one more day (and, in this case, spare her life). It is a relationship where one partner has complete and total physical power over the other, a power the exercise of which is only deferred through extreme cunning on the part of the apparently powerless partner. This structure of power is ignored by Grossman in her analysis of the *Nights*, much to the peril of her argument.

There is another essential element ignored by Grossman: Shahrazad is not the generator of her own tales. In fact, the tale tells the audience at the outset where Shahrazad has acquired her stories saying "Shahrazad, had read the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and maxims of sages and kings" (*The Arabian Nights* 14-15). The text does not introduce Shahrazad as a great writer or poet. In fact, if she has created any written or spoken works, the text does not consider them worth noting. Shahrazad is cast as knowledgeable in understanding

[1] The word cunning has a long history of being employed to disparage and discredit marginalized people. The *Nights* is a work that takes part in this history. The work refers to women as cunning, and views this as quite the deficit. While I recognize this word has a problematic history, I believe that Shahrazad is cunning. I refuse to maintain a view of the world that presupposes cunning is inherently a bad trait. Cunning is what saves Shahrazad's life, the life of all the women in her kingdom and the lives of many marginalized people to this day. This essay's use of cunning attempts, in some way, to reclaim the term for the empowerment of the marginalized.

the body of written knowledge that already exists. The text also makes clear the patriarchal control over this body of knowledge. It specifies that she knew the "sayings of men" and the "maxims of...kings." While Shahrazad may interpret and artfully convey the stories she tells, it is important to understand that these stories do not originate with her. Shahrazad has studied a body of knowledge that was generated by men and kings; she lacks what she may need most to subvert the power structure: the sayings of women and maxims of queens. Grossman rightly points out that "it is primarily as an historian that [Shahrazad] triumphs" (120). She fails, however, to comment on how the male domination of the narrative of history has an impact on what Shahrazad being a historian means. Shahrazad is no doubt an adept historian. Unfortunately though, she doesn't have a history in which women are good and autonomous beings because the history she has access to is controlled by men who have not been willing to portray women as good and autonomous beings. It is important to note that Shahrazad does not allow this patriarchal domination of history to remove from her the power of subversion entirely. With her own life, she writes a story that counters the narrative favored by the powerful. She is everything the patriarchal history says women cannot be: autonomous and good. While Shahrazad may lack access to a proper women's history, she generates one with her own existence.

Still, if the function of Shahrazad's tales is not to convince Shahrayar that women are autonomous beings, as Grossman proposes, questions about the function of her stories remain on the table. For while Shahrazad may not be able to choose stories that extend far beyond what Shahrayar will find believable, she is able to present tales that slightly expand his views on what is believable. Shahrayar's view on women by the time he meets Shahrazad is declared clearly in the frame story, which says "He then swore to marry for one night only and kill the woman the next morning, in order to save himself from the wickedness and cunning of women, saying

‘There is not a single chaste woman anywhere on the face of the earth’” (*The Arabian Nights* 14). Pursuant to the above points about Shahrazad’s precarious position, she seems to tell mainly stories that do not defy this conclusion. In fact, women are often figured as the villains in Shahrazad’s stories, such as the wife who turns her husband’s mistress into a cow and his son into a calf in “The First Old Man’s Tale” or the woman who destroys her husband's kingdom in revenge for the king’s intervention in her illicit love affair in the “The Tale of the Enchanted King.” While many of Shahrazad’s female characters represent exactly what Shahrayar expects of women, they are not the only women Shahrazad choose to portray.

Shahrazad does paint a very full picture of one specific loyal woman that defies Shahrayar’s picture of women as unchaste villains: Marjana. Marjana is a character who is dedicated to nothing more than her master’s will. Shahrazad’s message is clear: there are loyal women and they demonstrate their loyalty through extreme devotion. Shahrazad does not paint Marjana as having an autonomous will as Grossman’s argument would suggest, but rather as simply a loyal and dependent servant. And while this may not be a grand subversion of the patriarchal order, it is subversive enough to save Shahrazad’s life. She enters the narrative at a point at which Shahrayar does not believe he can trust a woman for more than a single night to be faithful to him. In order to save her own life, Shahrazad must take on the task of convincing him that there are loyal women. By imagining women who are loyal to their husbands and masters and presenting them to Shahrayar, Shahrazad attempts to create a space for her own survival that ultimately succeeds. Whether Shahrazad intends to be the kind of loyal and subservient woman she portrays to Shahrayar is not a question the audience is able to answer as they are positioned in the same place as Shahrayar for the majority of the narrative, as the stories’ audience. If Shahrazad fools Shahrayar, then she fools the audience as well. But it is

clear that whether an honest message or a cunningly deceptive one, Shahrazad is telling Shahrayar that there are loyal women in the world and that she is one of them. While Grossman's conclusion that Shahrayar accepts women as people with varying degrees of good and ill intent is an admittedly desirable outcome to the frame story, it isn't a believable one. Shahrazad has a much more important task at hand censored by powerful limits: she must save her own life and the lives of the women of the kingdom by satisfying her husband with her own apparent loyalty.

Recognizing the power structures that exert pressure on Shahrazad is not the same as believing that she has no agency or subversive ability. In fact, the amazing aspect of Shahrazad's story is that, despite the plethora of elements in her culture attempting to hold her back, she still manages to be subversive. She subverts Shahrayar's will merely by being alive at the end of the frame story. Her life also serves as a force for subversion. Shahrazad is everything that the women in her stories are not. She is both autonomous and good. She refuses to adhere to her father's wishes, even when he threatens to beat her (*The Arabian Nights* 20). In fact, she uses Shahrayar's power to threaten her father, telling him that if he does not adhere to her will, she will tell Shahrayar that her father has withheld her from Shahrayar (20). Her display of autonomy does not end with the defiance of her father either. The central function of the stories that she tells is to use her own skill to trick Shahrayar into sparing her.

Not only is Shahrazad autonomous and cunning enough to outwit Shahrayar, she is also good. Though she defies the will of her father and the will of Shahrayar, her motivation is pure. She seeks to save the people of the kingdom, who are in turmoil as they suffer under Shahrayar's tyranny (*The Arabian Nights* 15). In this way, Shahrazad is the kind of woman she is unable to portray in her own stories: she is autonomous, but she is also the protagonist of her own story and she has only good motivations. While Shahrazad may not be able to tell subversive

stories,she manages to live one. Her lived subversion is one of the most interesting elements to her story. With her life she attempts to generate a history that is not controlled by men's representations of women as either subservient or villainous.

Conclusion

"It is through such stories, or representations, that we develop understandings of the world and how to live in it. The contest between rival stories produces our notions of reality, and hence our beliefs about what we can and cannot do." - *Alan Sinfield*, Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain *(26-27)*

The tales that Shahrazad tells ultimately serve the function of bypassing the will of Shahrayar. She does this by telling stories with a unifying function, which each day manage to save her life and take Shahrayar one step closer to believing that he has, in fact, found a woman who will be loyal to him. Because Shahrazad is forced to entertain Shahrayar in order to save her life, and because the stories she has access to were generated chiefly by men in a patriarchal culture, she does not always portray women the way a 21st century feminist may want women to be portrayed. Understood in context, however, Shahrazad's choices are certainly subversive, as Shahrayar decides to grant her life permanently at the end of the tales. By being the exact kind of woman that she does not depict in her tales (she herself is autonomous and good), she proves the dominant ideas about women false. Shahrazad, despite an immense set of powerful forces, manages to subvert that power with her own life right under the nose of the central figure of that power.

While this conclusion certainly holds true for the female characters analyzed in this essay, it is difficult to know what a more comprehensive analysis would yield. As Irwin points out in his companion, the *Nights* is such a large collection that there was a long-standing legend

that no one could read every tale without dying. Irwin jokes that while reading the *Nights*, he did occasionally desire to end his own life rather than continue such a long and often tedious endeavor (1). There are many more tales to be explored and much more to be learned about the nuances of Shahrazad's depictions of women. In addition to the sheer size of the *Nights*, there have also been a plethora of different manuscripts and translations. There is little doubt that an analysis of a different manuscript or translation is likely to lead to at least slightly different conclusions. Though my analysis is thus limited, it offers a new look at Shahrazad as a storyteller.

This perspective is important because the tale of Shahrazad and the tales she tells have not been forgotten or left behind even in the modern world. Even Disney has generated their own version of one of the stories from the *Nights*. And while there are certainly a variety of factors that draw it back and back again into the cultural imagination, there is little doubt that Shahrazad's captivity and her resistance to it are among these factors. Shahrazad as a heroic figure, willing to risk herself to save the kingdom all while convincing the king to alter his view of women, is not a figure lost on the modern imagination. If stories set bounds on what we believe we can do, as Alan Sinfield proposes, then Shahrazad's persistent presence in our culture teaches us that we still believe we can resist power against all odds.

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